

# Gadsby's Tavern Museum

## INTERPRETIVE BULLETIN

### *“Lath Leds & Lines compleat”*

#### Window Hangings for the Ballroom of Gadsby's Tavern Museum

*In 1999, new window curtains were installed in Gadsby's Tavern Museum's historic ballroom. The curtains represent three years of fundraising and four years of research into period curtain styles. The following is a synopsis of the research process that determined the style, fabric, color, and embellishments for reproduction curtains appropriate to the late 18th-century Ballroom.*

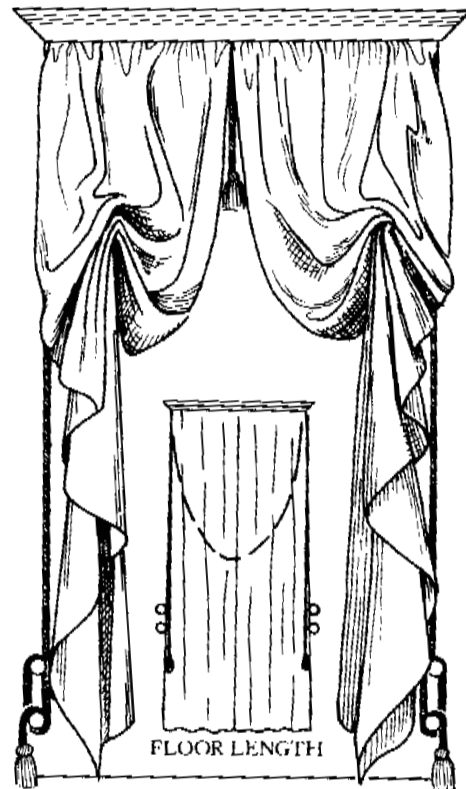
#### **Documentation**

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both public buildings and private homes often had no curtains at all. However, an inventory of the City Hotel furnishings taken in 1802 by tavern keeper John Gadsby lists, as part of the ballroom furnishings, “7 Large curtains with Lath Leds & Lines compleat” valued at \$9.00 each. The value of \$9.00 per window is six times more expensive than the curtains found in the City Hotel's best bedchambers. This difference in the value may be explained by the use of the word “compleat.” Based upon other period documents, John Gadsby probably included both the curtain hardware and some type of simple cornice, as well as the curtains themselves, in his value. It is also likely that the curtains were of a more substantial type of fabric and more expensively trimmed than those in the bedchambers.

#### **Style**

The reference to “Lath Leds & Lines” tells historians that the ballroom curtains were raised and lowered using a system of lines and pulleys. In this period, two basic curtain forms could have been described in this manner: festoon and drapery curtains. Both types, when lowered, covered the window opening with a flat expanse of fabric.

*Festoon* curtains, resembling what today might be referred to as balloon curtains,



*Line drawing, “Draw-Up Drapery Curtains,” from the 1989 Colonial Williamsburg Reproduction Catalog, page 149. Courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.*

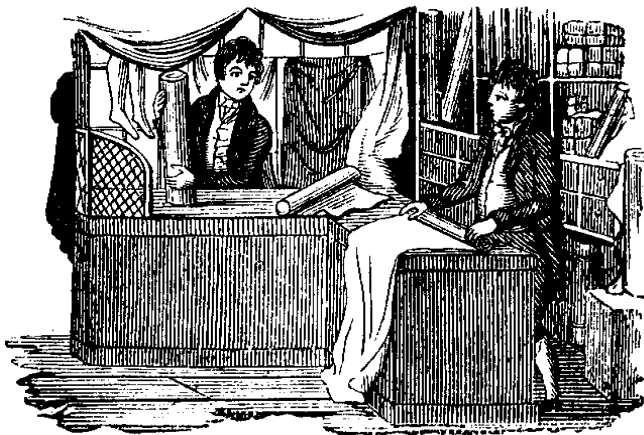
were made to draw straight up to the top of the window into a series of festoons or puffs. The lines used to pull up the fabric were gathered together and attached to a single cord which was then tied off on one side of the window frame.

*Drapery* curtains, were made of panels of fabric drawn up to either side of the window, creating a series of swags with tails. Separate cords were often used for each side of the curtain.

Is there any way to know which curtain style was

used by John Gadsby? A careful analysis of the original woodwork of the Ballroom provided answers.<sup>1</sup>

In January 1997, museum staff examined Gadsby's Tavern Museum's original ballroom woodwork at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The examination revealed ghost marks from the curtain hardware. Because the woodwork was stripped and repainted when it was installed in New York, only a few layers of paint obscured the evidence. Under a raking light, a pattern of marks emerged. Clearly visible were pairs of holes on both sides of the window frame where cloak pins for tying off curtain cords had been screwed into the wood. Cloak pins were necessary because period pulleys did not have self-stopping mechanisms. The presence of pins on both sides of the window at approximately the same height all around the room indicated drapery style curtains. If the marks had been only on one side, it would have indicated festoon curtains.



From "1800 Woodcuts by Thomas Bewick and His School." Ed. Blanche Cirker. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1962. Plate 173, *Business and Trades: Trades*.

## Fabric

One of the best ways to achieve curtains that were both fashionable and practical was with a careful choice of fabric. Because John Gadsby did not name a type of fabric in the 1802 inventory, it is necessary to examine a variety of possible options available to him.

*Silk:* Since he did not describe the curtains as silk, it is highly unlikely that they were made of this fabric. The inventory,

compiled by John Gadsby as collateral for a loan would have included any fabric description which would have allowed him to claim the highest possible value for curtains. Even in private households, silk was used in only a small percentage of homes.

*Cotton:* Printed cottons, while fashionable, were not always colorfast or durable.

*Wool:* A popular choice for fashionable furnishings throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, wool would have been an ideal fabric choice. It could be woven and finished in a number of ways and took dyes well to produce the strong colors which were fashionable at the end of the century.

## Color

There is no existing evidence which provides a clue as to the color which John Gadsby might have chosen for the curtains in the Ballroom. Illustrations of period interiors as well as surviving fabrics show that reds ranging from bright scarlets to deep maroons were among the more popular colors for window curtains. Throughout much of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, trims were often done in the same color as the fabric; however, by the end of the century, contrasting tones were increasingly popular. According to textile historians, the primary decorative effect relied heavily upon "dramatically contrasting colors in linings, borders, and trimmings" with "a marked preference for...strong, almost glaring, colors - - rich yellow, crimson, orange, scarlet and blue - - often arranged in bold combinations."<sup>2</sup>



Detail of curtain and tassel from "Grown Men Taught to Dance" by Hogarth. Photograph courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

## Embellishments

Trims were an important part of the overall effect of fashionable window curtains. Period illustrations show that fringes and tassels were among the most popular. In December 1801, John Gadsby purchased "3 Doz Curtain Fringes" from a local Alexandria merchant. Based upon the way in which the entry reads and the cost of the purchase, it is likely that he was actually buying tassels rather than fringe. These "fringes" could have been used to refurbish existing ballroom curtains or supplied to a seamstress or upholsterer who was making new curtains.

## Putting It All Together

The new window curtains for Gadsby's Tavern Museum's historic ballroom reflect architectural and documentary information as well as the latest research into 18<sup>th</sup>-century window treatments. It is important to remember that John Gadsby would have wanted curtains with an impressive appearance that his patrons would have viewed as fashionable. Coupled with a concern for appearance, however, would have been practical considerations. The curtains would have needed to be sturdy enough to withstand frequent raising and lowering, the effects of exposure to sunlight, and the dirt generated by the constant flow of people inside and the traffic on the unpaved streets outside.

The new curtains in the ballroom reflect the research outlined in this bulletin. Hanging at the windows are drapery style curtains of a deep, rich

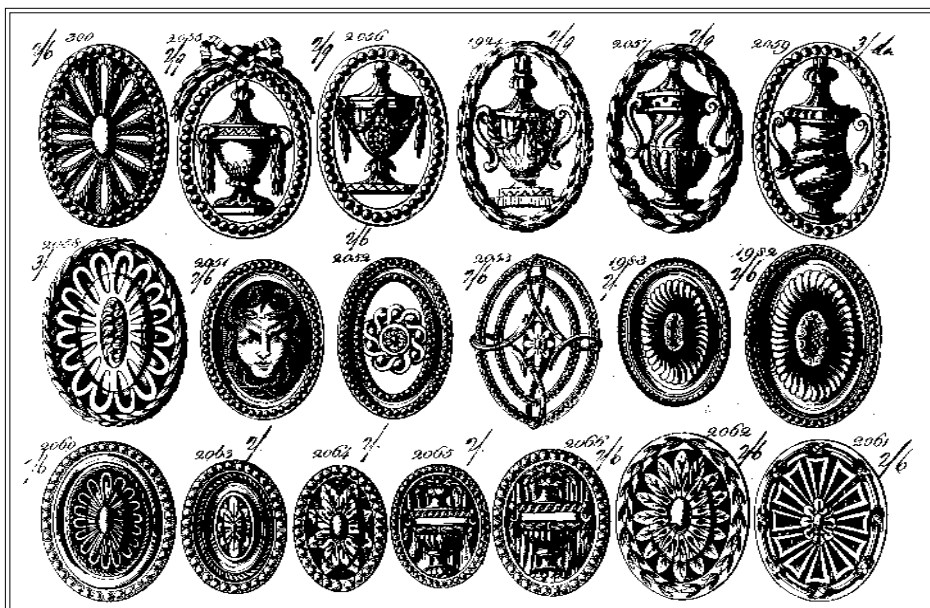
red color, ornamented with contrasting gold-colored fringe, tassels, and line and topped with fabric-covered cornices. The red and gold colors contrast with the Prussian blue woodwork to create a popular late 18<sup>th</sup>-century color palette. The cords used to draw up the curtains are tied off on paired ornamental cloak pins made of brass.

*Fabric:* The curtains are made of a heavy wool fabric with a woven ribbed texture which was referred to in the period as camblet. This type of wool was frequently used for window and bed curtains. The lining is a light-weight, glazed wool called tammy. Tammy is a plain weave used for everything from curtains to coat linings in the period. Both the camblet and the tammy, woven in 30" period width, were dyed authentic 18<sup>th</sup>-century colors.

*Trim:* The fringe and tassels used are made from a combination of silk and wool, dyed to match colors available in the period. The tassels were handmade, based upon tassels illustrated in period prints and paintings.

*Cord:* Made from the same yarns used in the fringe and tassels, the cord is woven over a jute core to produce a sturdy yet decorative rope to raise and lower the curtains.

*Curtain Pins:* Called cloak pins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the pins are hand cast from brass. The pin design is based on a late 18<sup>th</sup>-



Leaf 21 from a  
Brassfounder's catalogue of  
English hardware. Ca. 1789.  
Courtesy of The Winterthur  
Library: Printed Book and  
Periodical Collection.

century prototype which is similar to examples illustrated in period brass trade catalogs. The pin's neo-classical design elements are closely related to those found on the coal grate in the ballroom. A pair of pins is fastened to each side of the window to tie up the cord when the curtains are raised.

*Cornice:* Period prints show that cornices, often covered in the same fabric from which the curtains were made, were a popular treatment at the top of curtains. The decision to include cornices as part of the window treatments is based, in part, on the high value which John Gadsby assigned to the ballroom curtains in his 1802 inventory.

## Sources Today

The elements which make up the curtains were assembled from a variety of sources. The fabric for the curtains, the fringe, and the cord was woven by Context Weavers, a small mill in England, which specializes in custom reproductions. The tassels were handmade by noted furniture conservator, Leroy Graves. The brass cloak pins were individually cast by Massachusetts brass founder, Christopher Dunham. The cornices and curtains were constructed and installed by Marketplace Interiors, an Alexandria firm which works with a number of regional museums. Natalie Larsen, a specialist in recreating historic textile furnishings, and Ellen Donald, a decorative arts and material culture consultant, collaborated on the research and design of the curtains.

<sup>1</sup> The original woodwork for Gadsby's ballroom was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1917 and is installed in the museum's American Wing. The woodwork currently seen at Gadsby's Tavern Museum is a careful copy made in 1940.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Nylander, *Fabrics for Historic Buildings*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, The Preservation Press, 1990, Washington, D.C., 77-78.

## Suggested Reading

Gilliam, Jan Kirsten and Betty Crowe Leviner. *Furnishing Williamsburg's Historic Buildings*. Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1991.

Montgomery, Florence M. *Textiles in America, 1650 – 1870*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1984.

Saumarez Smith, Charles. *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993.

Schoeser, Mary and Celia Rufey. *English and American Textiles from 1790 to the present*. New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1989.

*Funding for the research, fabrication, and installation of the new ballroom curtains was generously donated by the Gadsby's Tavern Museum Society and the Alexandria Association.*

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